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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2130

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000065

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/15/2019

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SUBJECT: HOW THINGS WORK (OR DON'T) -- INSIGHTS INTO THE TURKMEN INTERAGENCY PROCESS

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Churchill once described Russia as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Turkmenistan remains a black box behind a translucent window. You kind of see something, but you're not sure. You have your hand on something, but what is it? All of this makes observing and working in Turkmenistan sometimes frustrating and enervating. Understanding how this place works is not easy.

¶2. (C) Recently, we gained some insight into how Turkmenistan's incredibly bureaucratic inter-agency process functions. We have long known that any request from us must jump several hoops and get approval from several ministries before a blessing by the Cabinet of Ministers. We've also suspected that some, if not most, items of import need presidential approval. According to contacts at the Ministry of Economy and Development and the Supreme Council for Science and Technology, a request or proposal first must be cleared by all relevant ministries at the ministerial level. If one ministry opposes, that is enough to kill it. Proposals that pass this hurdle must then be approved by the relevant Deputy Chairmen. This is the stage referred to by Turkmen official contacts when they say approval is "with the Cabinet of Ministers." At this stage, the Deputy Chairmen negotiate among themselves. Personality issues between them can also torpedo proposals. Personality problems between ministers can also stop proposals at the ministerial-level as well. (And this is a common problem.) Finally, once the Deputy Chairmen have signed off, a proposal can go to the President for final approval.

¶3. (C) Contacts told us that the best way to make sure a proposal will be accepted is to keep it narrow. The more ministries that are required for approval, the more likely it will hit a speed bump or will involve two or more leaders who hate each other and will say no for reasons that have nothing to do with the merits of the project. Contacts have also cautioned us not to use language that "widens the scope."

For example, a perfectly good proposal that deals with local governance, might be approved by one entity (by the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, for example). However, labeling something "local governance" means that the parliament must also approve (regardless of whether it involves the parliament or not.) If the heads of those two bodies do not get along, then the project is doomed to failure. It would be better to label the project something else.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: An understanding of this process clarifies many, many things. It explains, in part, why requests must be sent by diplomatic note (which makes it easier to shop around to various offices). It explains why although one ministry says it supports a proposal to work with it, in the end, permission is not granted. It clarifies why good relations between a minister and the Deputy Chairman over his ministry are essential (note former State Agency Executive Director Muradov's departure after locking horns too many times with Deputy Chairman Tagiyev). It also explains why permission for anything takes so long. And while the non-answer or "Turkmen no" is a cultural phenomenon, this helps explain why it is so prevalent in dealing with the government.

¶5. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: In many bureaucracies, ministries are happy to seize issues that could be even remotely construed as in the vicinity of their lane. That is not the case, however, in Turkmenistan. There is unusual discipline in refusing to be involved in issues that belong to another

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agency. Contacts have clearly stated that their ministries have no role in deciding issues that we would assume they would have some involvement in. Given that this is a society where initiative has never been rewarded and the Turkmen interagency process, there would be a benefit to avoiding involvement in the approval process, especially one that brings no monetary benefit. END COMMENT.

MILES